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Electrical properties of sand-clay mixtures: The effect of microstructure

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Summary

We have performed a series of laboratory experiments on saturated sand-clay mixtures. Measurements include frequency-dependent electrical properties using the four-electrode technique (10 mHz to 1 MHz), permeability, porosity, and acoustic velocities. We mixed clean quartz sand with Na-montmorillonite in a number of different configurations containing 0 to 10% clay: as a dispersed mixture, as discrete clay clusters, and arranged in distinct layers. Solutions of CaCl_2 ranging from 0.0005 N to 0.75 N (0.05 to 64 mS/cm) and deionized water were used as saturating fluids. We found the electrical properties to be dependent on clay content, fluid conductivity, and microstructure in a complex fashion. Increasing fluid conductivity and increasing clay content generally resulted in higher electrical conductivity. For an individual sample, two main regions of conduction exist: a region dominated by surface conduction and a region where the ionic strength of the saturating fluid controlled conduction. The sample geometry (dispersed, non-dispersed, or layered clay configuration) was found to greatly affect the magnitude of the surface conductance in the range of low fluid conductivity.

Introduction:

Electrical measurements are a useful, nondestructive tool for characterizing porous rocks and soils. Conduction of electricity through porous media occurs by two mechanisms. The primary mode of conduction is by movement of ions through the bulk-saturating electrolyte. Conduction also takes place as adsorbed ions move along the surfaces of pores and cracks. Thus, the conductivity of a porous medium is related to microstructural properties such as porosity, pore geometry, and surface morphology of the mineral grains lining the pores as well as to the dielectric properties of the mineral grains and pore fluid. Electrical conduction is also a function of the prevailing fluid saturation. For brine-saturated porous materials, Archie (1942) proposed the following relationship between bulk and fluid conductivities:

$$\sigma_{bulk} = \sigma_{fluid} a \phi^m \quad (1)$$

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Experimental details:

where σ_{bulk} is the electrical conductivity of the porous medium, σ_{fluid} is the electrical conductivity of the saturating fluid, ϕ is the porosity, and a and m are parameters that are supposed to be constant for a certain type of rock. The ratio $\sigma_{fluid} : \sigma_{bulk}$ is the formation factor F . Equation 1 assumes that the contribution of surface conduction to bulk conduction is negligible. If that is not the case, it has been found in theoretical (Johnson et al., 1986) and experimental work (Waxman and Smits, 1968; Sen et al., 1988; and Sen and Goode, 1992) that Archie's law has to be modified to include a surface-conduction term. Johnson et al. (1986) defined a length parameter Λ , which is a weighted volume-to-surface-area ratio (a measure of the dynamically interconnected pore size) defined as

$$\frac{\Lambda}{2} = \frac{\int |E(r)|^2 dV_p}{\int |E(r)|^2 dS} \quad (2)$$

$E(r)$ is the electric potential field at point r , V_p is the pore volume, and S is the surface area (i.e., the pore-solid interface). Λ has units of length and is a parameter characteristic of the geometry of the porous medium. It is therefore transferable from one experiment to another for a specific medium. This relation is valid for materials where the (insulating) grains are coated with appreciable amounts of clay minerals (Johnson et al., 1986). When dry clays are saturated with brines, the counter ions, which usually balance out charged impurities by bonding to their external surfaces, hydrate and become mobile within a layer. Surface conduction due to these counter ions then acts in parallel with the ionic conduction associated with the brine. For relatively high-salinity pore fluids, a linear relationship was derived (Johnson et al., 1986):

$$\sigma_{bulk} = \frac{1}{F} \sigma_{fluid} + \frac{2\Sigma_s}{\Lambda} \quad (3)$$

where Σ_s is the surface conductivity. When σ_{fluid} and σ_{bulk} are plotted on a linear scale, the slope equals the reciprocal of the formation factor F , and the intercept with the ordinate axis $b = 2\Sigma_s/F\Lambda$.

Sample Preparation and Characterization

F-50 Ottawa sand from U.S. Silica and Na-montmorillonite (Wyoming bentonite) were used to build the unconsolidated samples. The samples were packed in 2-in.-diameter heat-shrink tubing with sintered Hasteloy frits at both ends providing support and allowing fluid flow. Sample height was 1.5 in., and AgCl-coated silver wire electrodes were positioned in the casing 0.25 in. from either end of the sample. The samples were saturated with saline fluids of varying concentration, ranging from 0.0005 N to 0.75 N of CaCl_2 (0.05 to 64 mS/cm). Measurements were also made using de-ionized water.

Apparatus and Measurement Procedures

The experimental setup is shown in Figure 1. The prepared soil sample was placed in a Hassler sleeve, which controlled the pore pressure in the sample during the experiment. The various loads (60 psi) ensured that the sample was hydraulically sealed in the holder (i.e., sidewall flow is avoided) and also provided for simulating shallow burial.

Electrical Measurements

Various fluids were pumped through the samples and both frequency-dependent and -independent electrical properties were measured using an HP4284A LCR-meter. Electrical measurements were made at 1 kHz while the sample equilibrated to a new saturating solution.

Hydraulic Permeability Measurements

Following successful measurement of the electrical properties, we used a constant flow technique to measure hydraulic permeability. Darcy's Law was applied to obtain the hydraulic conductivity K and permeability k :

$$K = -\frac{Q}{A} \frac{1}{dH/dX} \quad (4)$$

$$k = K \frac{\mu}{\rho_w g} \quad (5)$$

where Q is the volumetric flux, A is cross-sectional area, dH/dX is the total soil-water potential gradient between the two tensiometers, μ is the dynamic viscosity, ρ_w is the density of the fluid, and g is gravitational acceleration. All hydraulic conductivities/permeabilities were measured using deionized water.

Results and discussion:

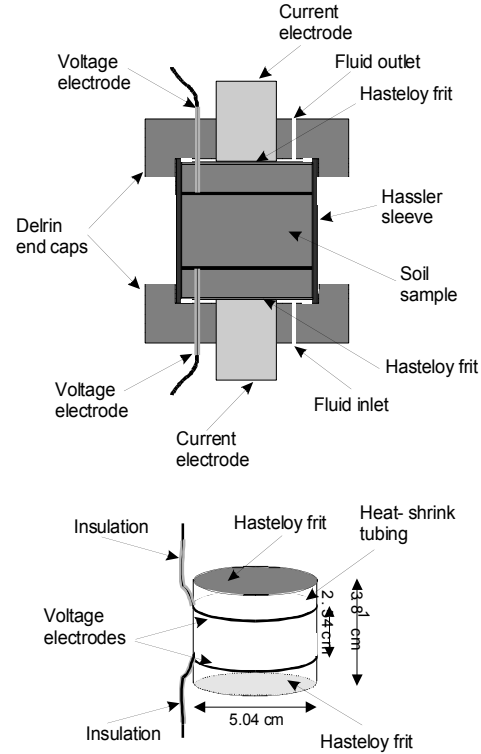
Hydraulic Permeability Measurements

We performed several tests to confirm that permeability was independent of fluid salinity. We

found only minor variation among permeabilities measured using CaCl_2 and using deionized water and no consistent change of permeability with time or total volume of water flowed. Permeabilities measured on all the sand-clay samples are listed in Table 1. These permeabilities varied within two orders of magnitude.

Figure 1: Experimental setup

The highest was measured for the clean sand sample ($6.1 \cdot 10^{-12} \text{ m}^2$), and the lowest was found for the 10%-



dispersed sample ($0.048 \cdot 10^{-12} \text{ m}^2$). The two other samples containing 10% clay had permeabilities similar to that of the clean sand sample.

Electrical Measurements

Single-frequency measurements are reported at 1 kHz. Measurements at this frequency generally have a phase angle near zero and thus mostly contain the resistive component.

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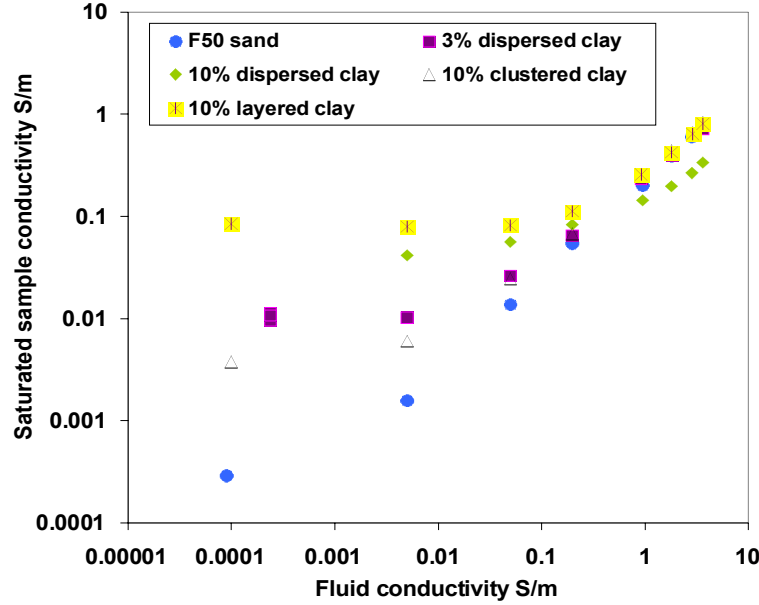


Figure 2. Log-log plot of σ_{bulk} vs. σ_{fluid} .

Measurements were generally made using CaCl_2 as the saturating fluid. The electrical measurements are illustrated in Figure 2. Two different regimes are visible in Figure 2. At high fluid concentrations there is a linear dependence, and the gradient is approximately unity. Movement of ions through the bulk-fluid phase is the dominant mechanism of conduction in this regime. However, at low fluid concentrations, the bulk conductivity is no longer solely dependent on the fluid conductivity. In this regime, surface conductance due to mobile ions in the electrical double layer of the clay becomes more important. In the lower fluid concentration regime, the curves tend to a constant, which represents the value of the surface conductivity. The clean-sand sample has a straight-line dependence of σ_{bulk} on σ_{fluid} and a low intercept (i.e., a low surface conductance). As the clay content increases, we see an increasing effect of surface conductance on the magnitude of the intercept. A significant change is seen when the configuration of the clay is altered; 10% clay configured as clusters gives a lower intercept than does a 3%-dispersed configuration, and a 10%-layered configuration results in the highest intercept overall.

Electrical Parameters

We estimate various electrical parameters based on the theory of Johnson et al. (1986). The formation factors are calculated as the reciprocal of the slope in a linear version of Figure 2. For most of the samples, the formation factors are ~ 5 , except for the 10%-

dispersed sample, which has a formation factor of ~ 13 . Under certain conditions, the Λ -parameter can be correlated with the hydraulic permeability k and the formation factor F (Johnson et al, 1986; Kostek et al., 1992):

$$\Lambda = \sqrt{k \delta F} \quad (6)$$

We use this equation to calculate the Λ -parameters listed in Table 1. A high Λ -parameter of $15.4 \mu\text{m}$ is found for the clean-sand sample, while the 10%-dispersed clay sample has a Λ -parameter of $2.3 \mu\text{m}$. We expected a higher Λ -parameter for a sample with a lower surface area (and thus a lower clay content) and vice versa because $\Lambda \approx V_p/S$. Because the sample volume is practically identical for all samples, the Λ -parameter becomes approximately proportional to $1/S$. The surface conductances listed in Table 1 are calculated from the intercept b as (see Equation 3 for derivation):

$$\Sigma_s = \frac{b \Lambda F}{2} \quad (7)$$

The surface conductances vary between $0.20 \mu\text{S}$ for the clean sand sample and $2.45 \mu\text{S}$ for the 10%-layered clay sample. In comparison, Nettelblad et al. (1995) found surface conductances in the range 0.05 - $0.15 \mu\text{S}$ for artificially made, clay-free sand-stones.

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Table 1: Hydraulic and electrical properties measured on the various samples

		F50 clean sand	3% clay dispersed	10% clay dispersed	10% clay clusters	10% clay parallel layer
Conductivity (DI)	K (cm/min)	0.360	0.097	0.003	0.156	0.228
Permeability (DI)	k (10^{-12} m ²)	6.14	1.65	0.05	2.73	3.92
Porosity		0.344	0.365	0.357	0.306	0.383
Slope	m	0.206	0.197	0.076	0.225	0.196
Intercept	b (S/m)	0.0054	0.0188	0.0576	0.0167	0.0757
Formation factor	F (=1/m)	4.9	5.1	13.2	4.4	5.1
Λ parameter	Λ (μ m)	15.4	8.2	2.3	9.8	12.7
Surface conductance	Σ_s (μ S)	0.20	0.39	0.85	0.36	2.45
Archie's exponent		1.48	1.61	2.51	1.26	1.70

The estimated values of Σ_s follow the trends observed in Figure 2 quite nicely. We see an increasing surface conductance with increasing clay content for the dispersed samples; once the configuration changes, that is no longer the case. The 10%-clustered sample has the lowest surface conductance (of the clay-bearing samples), $\Sigma_s = 0.36 \mu\text{m}$, even lower than the sample containing 3%-dispersed clay; the 10%-layered sample, on the other hand, has by far the highest surface conductance. This is intuitively acceptable because the artificially constructed layered-clay configuration provides a preferential path for ion transfer between the frits, whereas clay in clusters is rarely interconnected and has a comparatively low surface area, even relative to the dispersed sample. The measurements on the two extreme configurations of the clustered and the parallel samples may provide bounds on the expected bulk conductivity of clay-bearing sandy soils and thereby help predict conditions in natural systems. The more “natural” configuration of the 10%-dispersed sample falls nicely within these bounds with a surface conductance of $0.85 \mu\text{m}$.

Conclusion

We have investigated the influence of various microstructural properties on the electrical properties represented by varying formation factors, Λ -parameters, and surface conductances. We found fairly similar formation factors and Λ -parameters for all the clay-bearing samples, except for the sample containing 10% dispersed clay. Based on these parameters only, one could expect that certain clay-related physical or chemical processes could be neglected for clay contents of less than 10%. However, the surface conductance varied significantly with clay content and configuration. An increasing surface conduction was found as the samples contained increasingly larger amounts of dispersed clay. The configurations of the clay also played a major role, with the clustered and parallel configurations having the lowest and highest surface conductances, respectively. Apparent high and low bounds on the expected surface and bulk conductance in a natural system may be derived from the measurements on these more artificial configurations and may thereby

provide valuable information for inverse modeling of conditions in natural systems.

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